



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Playing with American Folk Heroes of the Nineteenth Century

Guide for Curriculum Unit 89.05.07
by Ann Griffith Magda

Mrs. Magda got tired of writing and she asked me here to help her out. My name is Parson Weems and I am going to enlighten you as to what this unit is all about. It's about America, America as seen through the eyes of our best heroes. Now, Mrs. M. likes to call them folk heroes, but I say they are red-blooded, real live exemplary people—people you can look up to, people who can tell you what it's all about. She likes to point out that somehow we're not quite telling the truth, that we've romanticized and inflated their wondrous deeds. I say—so what? What does the knit-pickin' truth mean if you don't understand it, or if it's boring, or if you just plain don't want to believe it? Now, the main purpose of this unit, as I see it, is to get the students working on building a play out of the tales and ballads of such fine men—oh, excuse, Mrs. M., people—as honest George Washington (he is my favorite), young Danny Boone, generous Mr. Appleseed, boasting Davy Crockett, that wily Yankee Peddler, traveling Sweet Betsey, them slave fellows, talkative Jim and wise Toby, mysterious Peg Leg Joe, strong man John Henry, warm-hearted Jesse James, surprising Annie Oakley, and that true-to-the-job Casey Jones. But first, as you well know, children have got to be guided, and Mrs. M. has planned some exercises and activities—ones to get the students thinking creatively, work cooperatively as a team, and then, to collaborate on the final theatrical piece. They'll work on props and characterization, improvisations and scripting, things like that. At the end of the semester I'll jump in and we'll put on a play. Well, I think that about says it—but before I leave I would like to tell you the story about young George Washington and his daddy's cherry tree. Oh, not now? Sorry folks, our story will have to wait. Thanks for listening to an old man. Good day.

(Recommended for Drama, Language Arts, English, Social Studies, and American History classes, grades 5-12)

Key Words

Playwriting Drama Folklore American Heroes Mythology

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